"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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AGRICULTURE AND VOCATION

By John La Farge *

There is no longer need to prove that our nation faces disaster if all but an insignificant fraction of the American people are divorced from the land. The fact that a bare fourth of our population live upon the soil is exerting pressure in quarters where it would not be generally expected. It is one of the factors that contributes to the acuteness of our labor situation; and it profoundly affects our Catholicism. Vanishing farm ownership even among those who do live upon the land, causes alarm. In 1880, twenty-five percent of farmers were tenants; in 1935, forty-two percent of American farmers were tenants. Tenancy brings definite evils within the agricultural realm, such as destruction of the soil, excessive mobility, wearing down of family morale. A vanishing rural population means an ever-increasing urban proletariat. More and more people are dependent immediately upon the will of another for their daily existence, with consequent loss of economic, and with it social and political, independence.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF FOREIGN MISSIONS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH U. S.

The issue is not concerned simply with providing food for the nation. Meat, vegetables, milk, fruit, butter and eggs may be furnished possibly in a system of highly concentrated agriculture, through industrialized or corporate farms, specialized technique, elaborate distribution. Scientists like to tell us we may some day dispense altogether with the soil, raise beets and cabbages in trays, as we now raise fowls in trap-nests. Nature's methods are too fickle and subtle to arouse much confidence in these schemes. But whether they are feasible or not, the argument for agriculture as a way of life is rooted in things much deeper than the mere matter of providing food.

Where the issue lies was stated last November at the opening of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference in Richmond, Virginia, by Archbishop Cicognani, Apostolic Delegate to the United States:

> The burning concern of the Catholic Church with agriculture arises from the altogether unique relationship which exists universally between the agricultural occupation and the central institution of Christian, nay of all, civilization, namely, the family.... Throughout her history, the Catholic Church has instinctively felt a special kinship with the cultivators of the soil, and her enemies find cause of opprobrium in the fact that her sociological and economic teaching, even when expressed by Leo XIII, breathes, as it were,

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> a rural atmosphere. The reason is not far to seek. The farm is the native habitat of the family. Industrial society works against the family and in favor of divorce, desertion, temporary unions, companionate marriage; agricultural society is characterized by the strength, permanence and unity of the marriage bond and the comparative rarity of its dissolution....The farm family is the most important source of population growth.

To discuss all that is involved in keeping families upon the land is to discuss the entire program of rural life. The agrarian program proposed by the Catholic Rural Life Conference does not aim at keeping everybody in the country. Such a project would not only be impossible, it would be undesirable, for there appears to be no reason for interfering with a normal and healthy flow from the country to the city of those youths who find their vocation elsewhere than in agriculture. What the conference aims at, as has been repeatedly said by Bishop Edwin V. O'Hara and others of its founders, is to prevent total uprooting of families from the land--any family, all families. The conference also aims at creating, or at least urging the creation of, such conditions as will make it possible for families who are able and willing to do so, to return to the land.

If we can make it possible for families to return to the land, much of the problem of enabling families to remain on the land will have been solved. But as yet no such way appears to have been found. Many more steps will need to be taken before we find it; yet until it is found, we cannot talk of a solution to the agrarian question in the United States.

Let us suppose a family in one of our large cities, who are able and willing to return to the country and take up farming. What opportunity is there at hand for them to do so? There are many obstacles any couple meets with when they contemplate such a simple and obvious thing. If they wish to buy a farm--obviously on long-term payments--to live upon it and cultivate it themselves, they cannot just pick one up and start operations in the prevalent rural jungle.

Significance, if things were as they should be, would not lie in the fact that a large number of persons did actually return to the land. It would be that fit persons could and that some persons did return to the land; that the current had definitely set in toward self-subsistence even though but a few actually took advantage of it.

So far, very little, if anything, has been done by our state governments toward making such enterprises possible. What has the federal government accomplished?

The federal government's project in the Matanuska Valley, in southern Alaska, went through severe trials in its earlier stages, but is now reported as justifying the hopes that were placed upon it. Matanuska's success shows the immense aid that the government can extend to families able and willing to make good upon the land. The colonists were of varied background and experience and came into practically virgin territory. But with all due credit to the Matanuska project, and the credit is very great, it can hardly be considered an adequate answer to the query of how to make possible the return to the land. The question does not seem to be adequately answered if we are obliged to go far outside the limits of the forty-eight states; if we cannot find an opening for such persons upon the land that lies around us, near our centers of population, fairly close to civilization.

The government's various self-subsistence projects are likewise no answer to this question. The settlement at Arthurdale, West Virginia, in which Mrs. Roosevelt has shown such great personal interest, is a remarkable undertaking. Washington has spent upon it a minimum of $1,600,000. A year ago 132 families were taken care of there, in comfortable homes built without stint by the Resettlement Administration. But the settlement has not yet been demonstrated to be self-supporting, and the same may be said of the several other West Virginia and North Carolina subsistence projects. With but 3.7 acres to each family, Arthurdale is not agricultural. Like most of these undertakings, it is rural housing enhanced by a useful garden. Where local industries can be combined with rural housing projects for partial self-subsistence, and the whole plan is made to pay its way, it is, of course, an admirable improvement over industrial housing as we see it. One of the first modern examples thereof was set on foot under Catholic auspices among the miners near Lyons, France, some twenty years ago. But it does not come to grips with the genuine agricultural problem.

We come, then, to the crucial question as regards government aid to land occupation. That the government would like to aid such movements, I assume. That the Department of Agriculture could aid them, if it felt free to do so, I have no doubt. But will our present systems of organized agriculture let the department do so? That one gravely doubts. It is evident enough why such opposition is shown by our major farm organizations to any serious attempt to open agricultural opportunity for families who wish to return to the land. I have positive information that it has been most categorically shown. The reasoning is simple enough. Farmers are too numerous as it is. They are troubled with over-production and surplus. Such a movement, even on a moderate scale, would upset what balance between supply and demand they have been able to achieve.

The reasoning is clear. Within certain premises, it is irrefutable. But like other irrefutable reasoning it moves within fatally narrow limits. By claiming to settle one question it merely opens a much wider question: What, after all, is all our agriculture for? What of the system itself? Is it based upon genuine human needs, does it make for the common good, which includes the whole of man's nature, his spirit as well as his body, the family as well as the individual? Or is it based upon a short-sighted policy which bears within it the ultimate destruction of the nation through our social demoralization and our physical disappearance?

The problem, I believe, is insoluble without a revolutionary change in the very concept of agriculture. It means taking agriculture out of its present state of complete subordination to commerce and putting it essentially in the realm of personal service to the community. It means basing agriculture primarily upon the idea of vocation and not solely upon that of a competing food-supply business. This does not mean divorcing agriculture from commerce. It will retain certain commercial aspects, national and international, for they are essential to the supply of certain modern needs. It does not mean abolition of business and legitimate profit. But it does mean that commerce and trade, business and profit, industrial organization and systematized distribution, as applying to agriculture, should be mere instruments, not masters, of the farmer's professional vocation.

The farmer's vocation, using the word in its true and traditional Christian sense, will be what it was originally, to supply the fruits of the field to his own family and to the community. Where the product is one that cannot be supplied locally, as with tropical fruits for the Northern States, they will be supplied to the nation. But the choice between local and

national marketing will be based upon real needs of the locality or nation, not upon needs and desires created by reckless application of industrial methods to agricultural distribution. If those needs are to become rational, we shall need to tone down certain refinements of luxury. We shall keep our grapefruit, which is no longer a luxury, but we shall eat eggs and butter from within a hundred-mile area. The farmer will buy and sell; he will use modern machinery and technique whether of production on or distribution from his family-sized farm; but the principle from which this is done will be totally different from that which now so largely prevails. The vocation will lead to the vocational group, in which the interests of all parties to production and distribution of a certain type of product are harmonized--not only harmonized, but actually united in a common effort for the common good. Since the common good includes the good of the consumer, the latter's interests must be considered in the adequate organization of the vocational group.

Under such a system, ownership of the land will be rescued from the extreme of anti-social individualism, which leads ultimately to divorce from the land too selfishly held; and from the other extreme of collectivism. J. Maspons, a leader in the very progressive agrarian reforms that Catholics were instituting in Spain prior to the Civil War, wrote in IBERICA, November 1, 1930: "You cannot reckon with the factor of the land, unless you reckon with the factor of the man on the land....Not only economic but moral conditions are necessary in order to make good use of the right of property and to direct its exploitation."

Is such a revolution possible, for that is what it is? To an extent it has already begun. Reasons for saying this are not as unlikely as may appear. Obviously agriculture cannot by mere fiat be put upon a vocational basis, however powerful that fiat might be. The breakdown of the National Recovery Act taught us some lessons, for the country was socially and politically not prepared for such useful features as did exist in the Act. While the goal is in itself a revolution, its achievement can only be by an evolution. "No other form of human activity," says the Spanish writer just quoted, "offers such varied and complex problems as agricultural activity." What has happened in the United States is that a great variety of movements dealing with these complex activities have been set on foot, some of them under non-Catholic or secular auspices, some from Catholic initiative. Of themselves, in the natural process of time, these are destined to lay the foundation for the vocational concept of agriculture. These movements fall into several classes, all tending in one way or another to prepare for the vocational ideal.

First, there are movements which tend to restore the rural family and build up the farmer's own spiritual life through the rural parish, rural schools, all that goes to inspire a sense of vocation, a genuine calling from God in rural life. He is reminded that his natural vocation is an instrument of the supernatural vocation: his position as a member of the church whose harvest is souls for eternity.

Then there are movements for the widespread distribution of private land ownership as the bulwark against the advance of materialistic collectivism and proletarianism. The abolition of land incorporation and the industrial farm, rescue of family farms from commercialization, and the reduction of absentee landlordism are some of the objectives aimed at. Such movements naturally tend to decentralize government and to decentralize the exchange of food products, thus removing further obstacles to the growth of the vocational group. They tend toward the functional organization of rural communities, by means of which city and country learn to cooperate. Economic

units are formed whereby producer and consumer are united in mutual aid.

Finally, there are the various types of cooperative enterprise: producers, consumers, financial or credit-union cooperatives. The producers cooperative and the credit-union are the first step toward any form of economic independence.

The consumers cooperative is not a panacea for all social ills. It has its definite limitations as to the type of exchange for which it is best suited, the degree to which it can be allowed to supplant socially useful types of private enterprise. Its ideas can be baneful if transferred too literally to the field of production, and still more if it be allowed to usurp the functions of government. But within natural limits it can be an agent of immense good for the community as well as for the individual, as long as its motivating spirit, as in all types of cooperative, is that of mutual Christian charity--social charity, to use Bishop Muench's pregnant expression--and not the mere advocacy of a money-saving device.

If agriculture is to be restored to its rightful place as a vocation, it must be liberated from the bonds in which capitalism--in the evil sense--now holds it fast. No individual can perform this act of liberation; and apparently no government will do it. The cooperative movements are a powerful instrument of such liberation. How effectively they do their part when under a spiritual and not a mere commercial motivation is seen by the success of the Antigonish movements in giving independence, honor and a frugal prosperity to the well-nigh destitute fishermen, farmers and miners of eastern Nova Scotia.

In addition to the movements mentioned, there are also certain important achievements which partake in a limited degree of the vocational idea. Such, for instance, is the family settlement of the Reverend Francis J. McGoey, at King City, Ontario; Father Ligutti's settlement at Granger, Iowa; and the cooperative enterprise set on foot by Father A. W. Terminiello at Bolling, Alabama. While they may lack many of the strictly professional elements of the vocational group, these experiments are rich in its moral motivation. Such instances will multiply. They will learn from one another's experiences, as British Catholics learned when one of their most notable agricultural settlements was suspended owing to lack of proper vocational direction.

But the great contest is yet to come. Sooner or later farming as a vocation--spiritually motivated in the Catholic philosophy of the family, and holding private property as a trust from the Creator--will come out of its hiding and face the issue with two incompatibles. Ranged against it is individualistic farming, organized, secretly tending toward collectivism through its very exclusivism. On the other side it is opposed by the openly collectivist movements, schemes for the generalized cooperative farm and the cooperative state. The die in this contest will be cast by the government itself, for short of a miracle in God's Providence, it has the power to make or break American agriculture.

Cautious leaders like Dwight Sanderson, of Cornell University, president of the American Country Life Association, see the need of a change in "personal attitudes" from those which were practicable in pioneer days, if agriculture is to survive and create opportunity for all. American agriculture, despite its numberless organizations, is totally inorganic, and depends upon legislation to cure evils which could properly be remedied

within a vocational organism. Agrarian interests are plentifully represented at Washington, but agriculture as such, as a vocation, is represented neither in our state nor in federal legislatures.

Where will our Department of Agriculture stand in the day of reckoning? Will the insistence of an O. E. Baker upon the family's paramount rights or the inward better thoughts of a Henry Wallace or an M. L. Wilson prevail against the all-powerful agricultural lobbies, and further the only course that will make it possible for America's youth to enjoy rightful opportunities in the use of the land? The answer to that question will in great measure be determined by the aid which American Catholics, clergy and laity alike, give to those of their brethren who are contending for the Catholic agrarian program.